

Spring 3-15-1990

The Letter: A Footnote in the History of The Mythopoeic Society

Glen GoodKnight

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Children's and Young Adult Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

GoodKnight, Glen (1990) "The Letter: A Footnote in the History of The Mythopoeic Society," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 16: No. 3, Article 5. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol16/iss3/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu.

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>



Online Summer Seminar 2023

August 5-6, 2023: Fantasy Goes to Hell: Depictions of Hell in Modern Fantasy Texts

<https://mythsoc.org/oms/oms-2023.htm>



The Letter: A Footnote in the History of The Mythopoeic Society

Abstract

An account of the founding and growth of the Mythopoeic Society and the beginning of a discussion of its potential future.

Additional Keywords

Mythopoeic Society—History and personal reminiscences; Mythopoeic Society—Scope

The Letter

A Footnote in the History of The Mythopoeic Society

Glen GoodKnight

Prologue

Since childhood I have always liked books and films that stirred and stimulated the imagination. It started in elementary school with Dr. Seuss, Babar, Dr. Doolittle, the Grimm brothers and Hans Christian Anderson, along with the films of Walt Disney. In Junior High School I moved on to the Oz books and Science Fiction, particularly stories that awoke a sense of wonder and had an other-worldly quality. I did not yet know what the word "numinous" meant, but that what I was especially seeking.

Then in the 10th grade several friends in the Science Fiction Club at school stated talking constantly about a new work called *The Lord of the Rings*. At first I was reluctant to read it because of its incredible length – three volumes – and was told I must first read its prequel, a children's book called *The Hobbit*. Spurred by my friends' continual discussion, I took the plunge to find out what all this enthusiasm was about.

In brief, *nothing* I had ever read before was like Tolkien. The adventure, the suspense, the detail, the looming dark backdrop of ancient things, and above all the sense of the numinous. Here was a believable universe that offered a both a fantastic and optimistic, view of the world. Tolkien had fired up the imagination to see things from a new and huge perspective, and awakened a thirst and hunger for even more that dealt with his and other "secondary worlds." This led me to seek out all of the Tolkien fictional canon that was then available, even to going on a long bus ride to the Los Angeles Public Central Library in 1957 to ferret out "Leaf by Niggle" which was available only in bound volumes of the *Dublin Review*. It had to be called forth from the musty stacks. That story, quietly read in the library garden – a magnificent allegory on life and death and the value of art and creativity – left me strangely puzzled, yet whetted the appetite even more than before. I sought out more works that were, I hoped, "like Tolkien's," and was referred to books like *The Worm Ouroboros* and Fletcher Pratt's *The Well of the Unicorn*. At the time, these were disappointing in comparison. It was the 1950s, when Science Fiction was going through a new cycle of popularity, and fantasy was considered generally – both by most Science Fiction fans and the general public – to be outdated escapism, juvenile and darkly suspect.

After reading *The Lord of the Rings* for the third time, and having read *The Hobbit* to my younger sisters, I was determined again to seek out other books that were like Tolkien. While he was unique, he did possess a certain quality that seemed to be drawn from deeper sources that surely other people might also share and write about.

Finally after asking one of my good friends in the Science Fiction Club about the possible existence of other similar books, he did mention "the Narnia books" by C.S. Lewis. I was willing to give these a try. "So they are a series – are they anything like the Oz books?" I was told they were *not* quite the same thing, and that I should try them and judge for myself. Where could I find them? I was told in the children's section of the public library. I was mortified. No self-respecting sixteen year old would dare to be seen entering the children's section, opening one up to ongoing ridicule by derisive peers. But finally my thirst was strong enough to brave crossing that invisible line.

Lewis was not Tolkien, but he did have a similar quality. He also fueled the imagination with images, had a deep long-reaching perspective, and affirmed a universe that was positive and excitingly *alive*. I had been cautioned not to read *The Last Battle* until I had read the other six books, since it was the end of the series. Proceeding to read them in order, enjoying all the characters and adventures they had, I consciously didn't realizing the effect they were working on me. I can still remember the day I was lying on my bed as the clouds sped by in the late afternoon, devouring the last two chapters. After reading the last two pages of book, I was panicked. Unbelieving, I reread these pages with tears in my eyes. I felt as if I had been struck squarely between the eyes by some unknown cosmic force, and for the first time in my life knew beyond deniability of the reality of unseen things and truths.

Lewis was a prolific writer, and I went on to read his "Deep Space" or "Ransom" trilogy. There I discovered in *That Hideous Strength* his passing reference to Tolkien's "Numinor." This was like electricity! They did have something in common. Lewis had written many more books than Tolkien, and I began to read them (I admit, I did leave his and Tolkien's books on literary criticism for later years). While reading *Surprised by Joy*, Lewis' autobiography, I learned that he and Tolkien were friends. This helped explain a number of things, and my enthusiasm was nearly equal for both.

My high school days ended in 1959, and so did my close contact with my friends in the Science Fiction Club, as I went off to college. Over the course of the next eight years I met many friends. For the close ones, I would try to read passages of Tolkien or Lewis, but they didn't seem to share the same affection for the works of these men. It was frustrating and lonely to be the only one I knew who shared the same enthusiasm, and detailed interest in these two men who had meant so much to me, who had reanimated and remythologized my imaginative life. My reading and study of their other works continued, and in

about 1963 I was moved to investigate the works of the third most famous Inklings — Charles Williams. It was the *Arthurian Torso*, edited by Lewis that first introduced me to Williams. I had already read T.H. White's *The Once and Future King*, and was intrigued with how Williams might treat the Matter of Britain. But I carefully followed the suggestion to begin with Williams' novels. Here was a very different style than Lewis or Tolkien, yet he dealt with fantastic and extra-normal topics that had a similar resonance in the affirmation of good in his celebration of life. By the time I had read *War In Heaven*, *Many Dimensions*, and *The Place of the Lion*, I had become a devoted admirer, little knowing that his best novels and Arthurian poetry were still waiting for me.

The Beginning

A rumbling sea-change began in the American culture in the mid-60s. I had mixed feeling about a number of its aspects, but one of the positive things that happened was the power of the imagination was no longer feared or suspect by a growing number of people. They were willing to reassess and even challenge many things that had been taken for granted before. More and more, fantasy and mythology were intellectually acceptable, especially in young people where old guarded barriers were coming down. If you grew up after the mid-60s, you may find it hard to comprehend the very different intellectual climate that existed before that time.

By 1967 I was struggling hard to finish full-time college, having been forced for the five previous years to work full time and attend night classes. It was early in that year that I organized a Tolkien Society on the campus of the California State University of Los Angeles. At last I finally met some kindred spirits who also loved Tolkien's work. But the experience was frustrating, since it was a commuter campus, and because of schedules it was never possible to get everyone interested in one place at the same time. As a result, the meetings were small, if not fun and stimulating. That same Spring I also entered the University Library's Student Library Competition and won First Prize for my collection of Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams. The Collection has grown to more than ten times the size it was then, but it was an encouragement to bring attention to these authors, and some consolation to my previously feeling alone in the appreciation of all three.

Through contacts I made at college, and through friends of friends, I became aware of a fairly large number of scattered people who were interested in Tolkien. There should be a way of getting them all together. Many were high school students who were restricted as to late evening activities. So, why not have a picnic on a Saturday afternoon and invite everyone I knew to come who might be possibly interested. Of course, let it be the celebration of Bilbo and Frodo's birthday on 22 September 1967! Hand written invitations were sent out to almost two hundred people, and sealed with sealing wax. If they wished, people were asked to come as their favorite Tolkien character, to a public park in Los Angeles. About 125 people

came for games, a quiz, a costume judging, a mathem exchange, much food and good fun. After the costume judging, I announced the formation of a new organization, The Mythopoeic Society to be interested in Tolkien, Lewis, and Williams, and to have its first book discussion meeting at a member's home in the San Gabriel Valley the following month. I was then 26 and aglow with the enthusiasm and vision that there could be a Society devoted to these three authors, that might — besides being an exciting personal experience for myself and others — help heal the intellectual gap between the "establishment" and the "counter-culture" that were then at loggerheads. This was an audacious concept, implicitly challenging both sides.

We were launched at last, and things developed thick and fast. The monthly discussion meetings became the prime activity, but we also had another picnic in the spring of 1968 to celebrate The Destruction of the Ring and the Elvish New Year. These spring and autumn picnics became annual events until the late 70s. By the autumn of 1968 a second discussion group was formed in the San Fernando Valley, and a third was added in the autumn of 1969 in the Pomona Valley. I was the moderator or discussion leader at each of the meetings. While a few people attended more than one group, most did not. It was at the annual autumn and spring picnics were everyone was encouraged to come together for a unified celebration. *Mythlore* was first born on 3 January 1969 (Tolkien's 77th birthday), and the monthly bulletin, which had announced the same topic for each of the groups, with maps and directions to the meetings locations, was renamed *Mythprint*. I edited of both publications. By this time I had begun my teaching career, and this and the Mythopoeic Society took up nearly all of my available time, which was given gladly. I was meeting so many wonderful and stimulating people. We had excellent discussions, where information and insights were shared. Others too found the books stimulating. I certainly no longer felt alone, being constantly busy with meetings and the publications.

Later in 1969 a fourth group in West Los Angeles was formed, and each of my Saturday nights were taken up with leading discussion meetings. I would work on *Mythlore* and *Mythprint* in the other evenings and Sunday afternoons. And yet the Society continued to grow in several ways. People began to subscribe to the publications who lived outside Southern California, and there was interest in forming a new fifth discussion group in the area. Since there were seldom five Saturdays in a given month, I couldn't continue to moderate all the groups and still see the Society grow, as it seemed bound to do. From this set of challenging circumstances, a new system of elected group officers, Moderator, Secretary and Treasurer (later changed to Registrar), were set up to run the affairs of each local group and to attend the Council meetings which were held on Sunday afternoon about every three months to conduct general Society business, formulate policy, and coordinate activities. By 1970 we had about ten discussion groups and were continuing to think of greater things. Groups were now formed outside the Southern California

area, and an afternoon picnic was not sufficient to attract people to come from the north or from other states. A Conference was planned, to last several days, with lodging and meals included. The first location was Harvey Mudd College, one of the Claremont Colleges near Pomona, California.

Compared with what had been done before, the first Mythopoeic Conference was a very ambitious and presumptuous undertaking. As the time of the event grew closer, and the detailed work increased, I became more worried that a variety of glitches were bound to occur. But the hard work and dedication of many people made it come off superbly well. C.S. Kilby was our Guest of Honor, along with the special appearance of John Lawlor, a former student of Lewis and editor of a book of essays for him.

By 1971 and the time of the second Conference, we had eighteen discussion groups — ten of them outside of the Greater Los Angeles Metropolitan area, and four of them in other states. But we were growing in other ways as well. We had four different Special Interest Groups, that were outside the Discussion group system, and open to all who wanted to participate. There was the Inklings II Writers Workshop, for aspiring writers to share their works in Progress. (Its publication, *Mythril*, continued beyond the group's existence, was refigured as *Mythellany*, which in turn was succeeded by the current *Mythic Circle*.) There was the Mythopoeic Linguistic Fellowship, which produced *Parma Eldalamberon*. There was the Performing Arts Workshop, which produced a truly splendid masque of Williams' *The Greater Trumps* at the second Conference in 1971. There was The Company of Logres, which was meant to delve deeply into the nature of myth itself, especially Arthurian myth. And there was the Neo Pre-Raphaelite Guild, for members interested in art and illustration. It appeared whatever new interest area developed, a group was created to cover it. It seemed we were close to trying to offer something for everybody.

Beginning in 1970, the Society made it its goal to become a non-profit, tax exempt organization, recognized as such by the Internal Revenue Service. The initial and primary reason for this at the time was to qualify for lower postage rates (which was and is a large expense), and secondarily to qualify for tax deductible contributions. In order to accomplish this it was necessary to write both an Articles of Incorporation and Bylaws to conform both with State law and I.R.S. regulations. (This is why we do not have a document called a Constitution.) The technical meetings to hammer these out were long and many, and nearly exhausted the patience of all involved. But the hard work did pay off — we received our tax exempt status and incorporation in the spring of 1971.

The Society was a flurry of organizational and creative activity. There were the discussion groups, the special interest groups, the two annual picnics, and the annual Conferences. And all of this had been accomplished in four whirl-wind years. Many people made the Society the near exclusive focus of their social activities. The merger of the

Tolkien of Society of America in 1972 was also a major event in the Society's early history, which was to have unforeseen effects. It greatly increased the circulation for *Mythlore* and secondarily for *Mythprint*, and the majority of these new members were outside California. We now had a truly national constituency, yet were still governed by a regionally based legislative system of representatives of the Discussion Groups.

Could an organization which had grown to find its primary social activities based on a large metropolitan area — where personal communication could usually be had in less than an hour by a large freeway network — transfer this idea to a national and international scope? I didn't see why what had worked so well in one area couldn't be transferred to others. What we stood for knew no geographical boundaries. Los Angeles may be physically far from Oxford, but in the books I could share what the Inklings had imaginatively seen and written. What I didn't completely realize then was that the Society was going to be national and international in this same way — through the printed word: its publications. (Of course, there is the annual Mythopoeic Conference where we come together, but no matter how great it is and how much I would deeply desire we might all be there, only a relative few of Society members are able to participate, due partly to schedules, other commitments and interests, and finances.)

It is absurd to think that any organization of individuals can function without compromise and change. That itself is not questioned here, but rather how certain changes affected the vision and purpose of the Society — its reason for being. One of these was the scope of the Society. At the beginning it was devoted solely to Tolkien, Lewis and Williams. Over the course of the first two to three years I began to see that in discussing them, other works and authors were frequently brought in. Indeed they can *not* be studied in a vacuum, being extremely well read men — far better read than most of us — and they openly acknowledged their literary debts. Also, I did not desire to create "the cult of personality" as I saw happening later in some other groups devoted to either Tolkien or Lewis. Thus Myth, Fantasy and Imaginative Literature were added officially to our purpose in July of 1970. I thought this was the right decision, if it were seen as a statement that these three men had both drawn from and enriched these genres of literature. By better knowing these genres, we — who were, relatively speaking, poorly read — could better appreciate the special value and contribution of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams. I supported the official modification while the Bylaws were being drafted, with the expectation myth, fantasy, and imaginative literature would provide an enriching *background* to the three authors who were to remain in the *foreground*. Regrettably there have always been individuals in the Society who see it differently, who have a passing interest in the three authors and find other works and authors of more immediately involving. There are those who would like to see the Inklings soft-pedalled, if not outright omitted entirely.

(Continued on page 50)

Yolen, Jane. "America's Cinderella." *Children's Literature in Education*, Vol. 8, No. 1, whole number 24, Spring 1977. (Critical of Disney for replacing the independent heroine by the helpless creature, attacks books based on film, and other retellings, rather than the film itself, which in my opinion, actually gives a more independent role to Cinderella than Yolen implies.)

(This is an expanded version of an article which appeared first in *Amor Hen* 96, March 1989, and it is reprinted with the permission of the author and the Tolkien Society.)

The Letter (continued from page 41)

While it is true that this feeling is aimed more at Lewis and Williams than to Tolkien, he does not escape either. Some would like to make him the esteemed founder of the modern fantasy phenomena, and have said *that*, leave his bust reverentially ignored on the shelf.

For many years the Mythopoeic Society has been the closest thing available to being a general fantasy society. There have been, and there are, those who would like it to become exactly that. What then would become of its special devotion to these men and where would the special vision of the Society prosper? One way would be to officially change the nature of the Society in its governing documents, but that would be more difficult work than most people in favor this are willing to undertake. An easier way, if much less intellectually honest, was and is to ignore the Society's purpose; instead, use and permeate the existing structure, which took years of hard work to establish, for experiences and motives that are personally gratifying. And when the structure will not bend to these motives, they then either have become disruptively factious and/or dropped out with an injured complaint. This mentality or frame of mind has had an eroding effect on the Society from the first until now.

When we seek a product or service we naturally do comparison shopping, and chose that which is best suited to our needs or interests. And if this is not to our highest expectations, we may complain or bring pressure to see that the product or service is improved. This is perfectly normal, and indeed many changes have been made in the Society because of members' desires. But what if I join the George MacDonald Society and then pressure it to devote itself to Lewis Carroll? Should I join the American Society of Scottish Dancing and then demand that it devote equal attention to the native dances of the hundreds of nations on the earth? We need to respect the stated purpose of any organization we join, work to see it improve, and support it in the best way we can; not to pressure it in various ways to abandon or dilute its purpose, either in fact or in practice, so that it is weakened to the point that only mere lip service, or less, is paid to its stated goals.

Why are people not in full sympathy with the Society's purpose attracted to it? Many reasons: its very existence—its activities, its publications, its conferences, and the quality of other interested people involved. There is great amount of information and learning to be shared, and also great fun to be had in this organization. When people join the Society, we do not question their motives, but in good faith assume they share its interests.

Over the years its preexisting structure has been very tempting for certain individuals who emerge, or attempted to emerge, in a flurry of trumpets, to use what already has existed to make their grand mark. Some lost interest after a while, and went on to new fields to conquer; others spread bad feelings and dissonance when their goals were not accomplished as they wished. Some left to form other organizations which had their day in the sun and faded. Yet others stay.

The point of this, is so those who really *want* to delve into George MacDonald or learn the lore and intricacies of Scottish Dancing can indeed find other kindred spirits who have the *same* enthusiasm as they do; so they will not have to wade through organizations that promise one thing and deliver another. I wonder, will The Mythopoeic Society survive until its 50th anniversary in 2017 and beyond? And if so, will people who then study, discuss and enjoy Tolkien, Lewis, and/or Williams indeed find kindred spirits within The Mythopoeic Society? This is one of the very reasons why the Society was begun—not to see it mutate through gradual change away from its original intent and first love.

Change is necessary, and I have always welcomed changes that would *improve* how the Society's *purpose* was carried out. Unfortunately, some others have seen changes as an opportunity and leverage to alter the very purpose itself, usually with the best seeming of motives, of course. It will may be they are not consciously doing this, only following their own interests, but the effect is the same.

The Letter

It was in the autumn of 1972, when my daughter, Arwen, was about six months old, that I reflected personally how far we had come and how well things seemed to be going, that I received a letter from a man in another state. Its message was brief and to the point:

I hear much about The Mythopoeic Society, with all its functions and activities. I don't want to hear so much talk about the organization as an *organization*. What about speaking more *about* Tolkien, Lewis and Williams?

At first I was stung and annoyed—what could he mean? Of course the Society spoke of Tolkien, Lewis and Williams, and didn't the Society as a large and growing organization promote them better by offering something for nearly every interest? But then I began to see that in my five year whirl-wind experience with the Society, in many important ways the organization as a thing in itself was taking precedence over its stated purpose. Vocal people were pressuring for further generalizing changes. What had become of that original enthusiastic and unifying vision. Had it been compromised to see the Society grow? I wrestled internally, not sharing the letter with anyone in my pain over the matter. Yes and no, I finally said.

The reasons behind this yes and no answer, how the concept of the Middle Way was formulated, and why I have written this long, and at times plaintive account, will follow in the next issue.